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'Battle of Evangelists' Casts Shadow On TV Ministries, Evangelical Movement

PRINCETON, N.J. — The sexual and financial scandals that have rocked the electronic church in recent months, and the subsequent power struggle within the TV ministry, have cast a long shadow over many of the nation's most popular TV evangelists and the evangelical movement in general. Moreover, the cause of organized religion as a whole may have been harmed by the problems besetting the electronic church.

The revelations of wrong-doing have caused serious damage to the popular stereotypes of TV evangelists as a group. Far fewer now than in 1980 perceive them to be trustworthy, honest, sincere and caring. In addition, more now question their "special relationship with God" than did so seven years ago.

- In the current survey, perceptions of TV evangelists as "untrustworthy" outweigh "trustworthy" by 63% to 23%. In 1980, a 41% plurality had positive views while 36% were negative.
- Today, TV ministers are characterized as "honest" by 34%, "dishonest" by 53%. In 1980, honest outnumbered dishonest by 53% to 26%.
- Currently, 34% feel TV evangelists are "sincere," 51% that they are "insincere." In 1980, sincere ratings prevailed by 56% to 25%.
- At present, 48% believe TV evangelists "care about people" while 38% feel they do not. In 1980, "caring" outweighed "not caring" by almost a 3-to-1 ratio, 59% to 21%.
- Today, a 56% majority think the TV evangelists do not have a "special relationship with God," while 30% believe they do. In 1980, a strong 47% plurality felt they were endowed with this relationship while 33% disagreed.

As expected, self-described evangelical Christians (27% of the total sample) hold generally more favorable opinions than non-evangelicals on each of the five stereotypes. However, 47% of evangelicals currently describe TV evangelists as untrustworthy, 35% as dishonest, 33% as insincere, 26% as uncaring, and 38% say they do not have a special relationship with God.

Images of Specific Evangelists

Survey respondents were asked to rate 8 evangelists on a 10-point scale, on which the top 5 positions indicated "favorable" opinions and the bottom 5, "unfavorable."

With the exception of Billy Graham, who received favorable ratings from 76% in both the 1987 and 1980 surveys, the ratings of the other evangelists, especially those most directly involved in the current scandals, are lower now than in 1980.

Jim Bakker, for example, currently receives positive ratings (both highly and moderately favorable) from 23% and negative ratings from 77%. In the 1980 survey, favorable ratings of Bakker outnumbered unfavorable ratings, 58% to 42%.

Oral Roberts's positive ratings also dropped sharply, from 66% in 1980 to 28% today, while his negative scores rose from 34% to 72%.

Jimmy Swaggart now receives favorable ratings from 44% compared to 76% in 1980. His negative ratings have grown from 24% to 56%.

Somewhat less fall-off has occurred in the public's ratings of Robert Schuller — from 78% to 61% favorable, Rex Humbard – from 73% to 55% favorable, and Pat Robertson, from 65% to 50% favorable.

Jerry Falwell, who was not tested in the 1980 poll, currently receives 38% favorable and 62% unfavorable ratings.

Vote for Evangelical

As reported recently, public opinion, which was generally supportive of evangelical presidential candidates in 1980, has shown a sharp swing toward the negative, although a majority continues to say their vote would not be affected by a candidate's religious views.

In the latest survey, 15% say they would be more likely to vote for a presidential candidate who considers himself an

evangelical, while 29% would be less likely to do so, and 52% say it would make no difference.

In 1980, 19% said they would be more likely, 9% less likely and 66% would be unaffected by a candidate's beliefs.

Waning Confidence in Organized Religion

Finally, public confidence in organized religion continues to decline, with the proportion saying they have a "great deal" or "quite a lot" of confidence in this institution, down 12 points since 1985.

Following are the questions asked:

Here is a list of terms, shown as pairs of opposites, that have been used to describe television evangelists or ministers. From each pair of opposites, would you select the term you feel best describes television evangelists or ministers, in general?

Here are the key findings:

Stereotypes of TV Evangelists

	1987	1980
Care about people	48%	59%
Don't care about people	38	21
No opinion	14	20
Honest	34%	53%
Dishonest	53	26
No opinion	13	21
Sincere	34%	56%
Insincere	51	25
No opinion	15	19
Have a special relationship with God	30%	47%
Do not have a special relationship with God	56	33
No opinion	14	20
Trustworthy with money	23%	41%
Not trustworthy with money	63	36
No opinion	14	23

You will notice that the boxes on this card go from the highest position of plus 5 — for someone you like very much — all the way down to the lowest position of minus 5 — for someone you dislike very much. How far up the scale or how far down the scale would you rate (name)?

Ratings of Evangelists
(Based on those rating each man)

	Highly favorable (+5, +4) %	Mildly favorable (+3, +2, +1) %	Mildly unfavorable (−1, −2, −3) %	Highly unfavorable (−4, −5) %
Billy Graham				
1987 (90%)	35	41	13	11
1980 (92%)	35	41	14	10
Oral Roberts				
1987 (89%)	8	20	25	47
1980 (83%)	21	45	21	13
Jim Bakker				
1987 (78%)	5	18	28	49
1980 (28%)	18	40	22	20
Jerry Falwell				
1987 (78%)	9	29	24	38
1980 (NA)				
Jimmy Swaggart				
1987 (76%)	16	28	26	30
1980 (23%)	31	45	15	9
Pat Robertson				
1987 (72%)	13	37	24	26
1980 (25%)	21	44	16	19
Robert Schuller				
1987 (53%)	20	41	19	20
1980 (19%)	29	49	10	12
Rex Humbard				
1987 (50%)	10	45	22	23
1980 (43%)	22	51	20	7

NOTE: The figures in parentheses indicate the percentages rating each man.

Aside from how you feel about a presidential candidate in other respects, would you be more likely to vote for a candidate who considers himself a born-again evangelical Christian, less likely to do so, or wouldn't it make any difference either way?

The comparison:

Vote for Evangelical

	1987	1980
More likely	15%	19%
No difference	52	66
Less likely	29	9
No opinion	4	6
	100%	100%

I am going to read you a list of institutions in American society. Would you please tell me how much confidence you, yourself, have in each one — a great deal, quite a lot, some, or very little?

Confidence in Church or Organized Religion

	April 1987	May 1985
Great deal	32%	42%
Quite a lot	22	24
Some	22	21
Very little	18	11
None (Volunteered)	3	1
Don't know	3	1
	100%	100%

Scandals Strengthen Calls for Disclosure, Federal Regulation

The recent financial scandals within the $2 billion electronic church have strengthened public demands for government regulation of religious fund-raising and disclosure of the disposition of these funds.

Waning confidence in the television ministries has spawned a growing demand for regulation. In 1980, disagreement outweighed agreement that "the Federal government should regulate the fund-raising activities of religious organizations," by a 3-to-2 ratio. In the current survey, opposition to regulation prevails, but by a narrower 49% to 43% margin.

In addition, there now is virtually unanimous agreement (92%) that "religious organizations should make full disclosure of the funds they receive and how they are spent."

Moreover, substantially fewer now (14%) than in 1980 (28%) agree that "giving money to religious causes or organizations is more important than giving money to other causes." Disagreement, 81% nationwide, is now the majority sentiment in all population groups, including evangelicals, viewers of religious TV programs, and donors to TV evangelists.

Half of Adults Are Viewers

About half of American adults (49%) at least occasionally watch religious TV programs and one-fourth (25%) are considered weekly viewers.

Not surprisingly, self-described evangelicals (27% of the adult population) are the most loyal viewers, with 8 in 10 (79%) saying they sometimes watch religious television and almost half (46%) doing so weekly. At least one-third of non-evangelicals (36%) also watch these programs, although they tend to be less frequent viewers.

Paralleling the demographic profile of evangelicals, women, blacks, people 50 and older, the less affluent and less-well educated, those from blue-collar occupational backgrounds, and Southerners are disproportionately heavy viewers of religious TV.

The audience for religious programming appears to have grown slightly since 1983, when the last study was conducted, with total viewership up from 42% four years ago to 49% at present. All of this growth traces to an increase, from 18% to 25%, in weekly viewers.

Contributions

Four percent of the total sample — roughly 7 million adults — said they had contributed money to one or more TV evangelists within the last 12 months. The proportion of donors rises to 8% among all viewers of religious TV programs and to 12% among weekly viewers.

Roughly half of all contributors reported donations of less than $100 to TV evangelists during the last year, while half said they gave more than $100.

A majority of past donors said they did not expect to change the amount of their contributions during the next 12 months, while about one-fifth said they planned to give more and a similar proportion said they probably would give less.

The survey refutes one of the principal criticisms of the TV ministries — that they tend to dissipate viewers' interest in their local churches. Nine viewers in 10 say that watching religious TV has not affected their involvement. And those saying their involvement has changed are more likely to testify to more rather than less local church activity.

Following are the questions and key findings:

Respondents were asked whether they agreed or disagreed with each of the following statements:

Giving money to religious causes or organizations is more important than giving money to other causes.

	1987	1980
Agree	14%	28%
Disagree	81	61
Not sure	5	11
	100%	100%

Religious organizations should make full disclosure of the funds they receive and how they are spent.

	1987	1980
Agree	92%	86%
Disagree	5	7
Not sure	3	7
	100%	100%

The Federal government should regulate the fund-raising activities of religious organizations.

	1987	1980
Agree	43%	35%
Disagree	49	54
Not sure	8	11
	100%	100%

Do you ever watch religious programs on television?

Those who responded affirmatively, 49% of the total, were asked:

In the past 30 days, have you watched any religious programs on television?

Viewers within the last 30 days, 39% of the total, were then asked:

In the past 7 days, have you watched any religious programs on television?

The following table compares current viewership with that reported in a 1983 survey:

Religious TV Program Viewing

	1987	1983
Total viewers	49%	42%
Within past 7 days	25	18
Within past 8-30 days	14	14
31 days or more	10	10
Non-viewers	51	58
	100%	100%

The table below gives the detailed results:

Religious TV Program Viewing

	Total viewers %	Last 7 days %	8-30 days %	31 days or more %	Non-viewers %
NATIONAL	49	25	14	10	51
Evangelicals	79	46	19	14	21
Non-evangelicals	36	15	12	9	64
Men	44	21	13	10	56
Women	53	29	15	9	47
Whites	46	23	13	10	54
Blacks	68	39	18	11	32
18-29 years	39	18	11	10	61
30-49 years	47	22	15	10	53
50 & over	58	33	15	10	42
College grads.	42	18	16	9	58
College inc.	45	20	12	13	55
High school grads.	46	22	13	11	54
Not H.S. grads.	64	41	16	7	36
East	36	17	10	9	64
Midwest	46	21	14	11	54
South	62	37	15	10	38
West	48	21	16	11	52

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Has watching religious TV changed your involvement in your local church or synagogue? Has your involvement increased or decreased?

Here are the results:

Impact on Local Church Involvement
(Based on total viewers)

Has changed involvement	8%
Increased	4
Decreased	2
Not sure	2
Has not changed involvement	90
Not sure	2
	100%

All persons in the survey were asked:

By any chance, have you contributed money to any television evangelists in the last 12 months?

Here are the findings:

Contributions to TV Evangelists

Have contributed	4%
Total viewers	8
Within past 7 days	12
Within the past 8-30 days	4
31 days or more	3
Non-viewers	*

*Less than 1%.

The latest results are based on in-person interviews with 1,571 adults 18 and older, conducted in more than 300 scientifically selected localities across the nation during the period Apr. 10-13. For results based on samples of this size, one can say with 95% confidence that the error attributable to sampling and other random effects should not exceed 3 percentage points in either direction.

In addition to sampling error, the reader should bear in mind that question wording and practical difficulties in conducting surveys can introduce error or bias into the findings of opinion polls.

Only 4% of Americans Are Totally Non-religious

Only 4% of American adults can be described as "totally non-religious." These are persons who are not members of a church, rarely or never attend church, say religion is either "not very" or "not at all" important in their lives, and have no religious preference (that is, Protestant, Catholic, Jewish, Mormon or Eastern Orthodox).

Most likely to fall into this category are men, younger persons, and Westerners.

At the other end of the scale are the "superchurched." Thirty-one percent fall into this category and tend to be women, older persons, and residents of the Midwest and South. These are persons who state a religious preference, are members of a church, attend church regularly, and say religion is "very" important in their lives.

In between these two extreme groups are the "churched" and "unchurched."

The "churched," accounting for 72% of adults, must meet these categories — church members and attend church regularly, regardless of the importance they attribute to religion in their lives.

The "unchurched," accounting for 28%, are those who are not church members and do not attend church regularly, regardless of their other responses.

Demographic breakdowns are given for each of the four groups in the following table, based on 6,632 interviews conducted by telephone and in person in five selected weeks during 1986.

Levels of Religious Involvement

	Super-churched	Churched	Unchurched	Totally non-religious
NATIONAL	31%	72%	28%	4%
Men	23	66	34	6
Women	38	77	23	3
18-29 years	22	67	33	6
30-49 years	29	69	30	6
50 & older	38	78	22	2
East	28	72	28	5
Midwest	33	73	27	4
South	34	77	23	2
West	27	61	39	7
Whites	30	71	29	4
Non-whites	36	75	25	4
Blacks	37	78	22	3
Hispanics	31	72	28	5
College grad.	29	73	27	6
College inc.	32	72	28	5
H.S. grad.	31	73	27	3
Less than H.S. grad.	32	69	31	3
$40k & over	27	71	28	5
$25k-$40k	30	70	30	5
$15k-$25k	32	72	28	3
Under $15k	33	72	28	3
Married	32	73	26	4
Single	19	63	37	9
Divorced, separated	23	55	44	7
Widowed	42	81	19	2

New Book — "The American Catholic People: Their Beliefs, Practices, and Values" — Paints Surprising Portrait of American Catholics

- Catholics said by a 3 to 1 margin that "divorced Catholics should be allowed to remain in the Church."
- Support for a married priesthood is quite strong among Catholics (who accept it by a 2-to-1 margin).
- While Catholics are "conservative" on some key social issues, they clearly come down on the "liberal" side of other key social issues — most notably women's rights, gun control, and civil rights for minorities and homosexuals.

These are among the provocative findings in *The American Catholic People*, written by George Gallup, Jr. and Jim Castelli and published by Doubleday. Drawn from The Gallup Organization's data base, the book provides eye-opening insights into the 28% of American adults who identify themselves as Catholics.

Who are the American Catholics? 29% are under the age of 30; 16% are Hispanic, while 3% are black and another 3% classify themselves as non-white. 68% are parents; three out of four live in urban areas; and 55% identify themselves as politically right-of-center.

Gallup and Castelli compare this growing and increasingly influential population to the Protestant majority on a number of vital issues. They find that Catholics are more liberal than Protestants in their stance on the cutting of the defense budget and on the allocation of funds for social programs. Catholics will also be a major force for reduced military spending, moderation in foreign policy, and progress in the control of nuclear arms.

The American Catholic People: Their Beliefs, Practices, and Values. George Gallup, Jr. & Jim Castelli. February 20, 1987. $15.95 (Hardcover). Doubleday and Company, Inc., 245 Park Ave., New York, NY 10167. Contact: Diane Speicher (212) 984-7096

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